

Int'l Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act will benefit girls as young as 8 years old from being forced to become wives

Washington, DC –Congresswoman Betty McCollum (MN-04) today introduced the *International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act of 2009*

(H.R. 2103), legislation designed to put the United States at the forefront of ending child marriage around the globe. Everyday, as many as 25,000 young girls in the developing world are forced into marriage with adult men, some girls are as young as eight years old. Globally, an estimated 60 million girls in the developing world under the age of 18 are married, a figure that is estimated to increase by another 100 million over the next decade if present trends continue.

“In some countries such as Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Ethiopia, little girls – 8, 10 or 12 year olds – are being forced into marriages with men decades older. This is nothing short of modern slavery. These girls are condemned to a life of forced labor, coerced sex, extreme poverty and utter hopelessness,” Congresswoman McCollum said. “I want the United States to take the lead in ending child marriage and championing the value and potential girls have to develop, grow and contribute their skills to strengthening families, communities and entire countries if given the opportunity.”

Congresswoman McCollum is hopeful that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will support her efforts to protect and empower girls. She also calls on Republicans in the U.S. House to support her legislation. No Republican has yet co-sponsored the bill to end child marriage and the physical and sexual exploitation associated with it.

In Congresswoman McCollum’s legislation, child marriage is labeled a human rights violation that undermines U.S. investments in foreign assistance to improve women’s and girls’ education, health, economic and legal status. Out-of-school or unschooled girls are at greater risk of child marriage, while girls in school face pressure to withdraw from school when secondary school requires monetary costs, travel, or other social costs, including lack of lavatories and supplies for menstruating girls and increased risk of sexual violence. Not surprising, Child marriage has negative effects on girls’ health, including significantly increased risk of maternal death and morbidity, infant mortality, obstetric fistula and sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS. This inhuman practice can also result in bonded labor or enslavement, commercial sexual exploitation, and violence against the victims, according to UNICEF.

In 2008 the *New York Times* highlighted the issue of child marriage in Yemen where the

average age of marriage in rural areas is 12 to 13 years old according to researchers. Two cases of young girls, ages 9 and 10, already in forced marriages made international headlines as they sought divorces in Yemeni courts from their husbands who were 35 and 30 years old. A deeply rooted traditional practice, child marriage in Yemen is associated with a tribal expression, "Give me a girl of 8, and I will give you a guarantee" for a good marriage, according to the NY Times article.

The *International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act* will prevent child marriage by educating, protecting, and empowering young girls in the developing world. The act seeks to eliminate the harmful practice of child marriage overseas by requiring the U.S. government to develop an integrated, strategic approach to the prevention of child marriage. The legislation establishes a Trust Fund to Prevent Child Marriage, includes new funding authorization, and requires the State Department to address status of child marriage in countries with high rates of child marriage in the annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.

Seizing on the strong momentum to finally end child marriage, Senator Richard J. Durbin will introduce a companion bill in the Senate this week. Leading organizations, including the International Center for Research on Women, the International Women's Health Coalition, CARE and many other NGOs and faith-based organizations, have expressed support for the legislation. They laud the bills in the House and Senate as positive measures to prevent child marriage in developing countries, provide girls with educational and economic opportunities, and help ensure that the fundamental human rights of girls are protected.

The Department of State conducted a world-wide survey in 2005 and found child marriage to be a concern in 64 out of 182 countries surveyed, with child marriage most common in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South Asia as well as the Middle East. In 2007, the United States introduced and championed a resolution to reduce the practice of child marriage at the UN Commission on the Status of Women, which eventually passed with strong support. It is time for the elimination of child marriage to become a top foreign policy goal.

Congresswoman Betty McCollum (MN-4) serves on the House Appropriations & Budget Committees.

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